

# A pipe carrier performs his duties

By Bill Hess  
Tundra Times

Paul Little Chief did not seek out the role of spiritual leader for the inmates at the Hiland Mountain Correctional Center. "I was at the AFN (Alaska Federation of Natives) convention in Anchorage," Little Chief recalls. "An inmate who had been released, I don't know how he knew who I was, came up to me. 'I understand you are a pipe carrier,' he told me."

The former inmate told Little Chief that a group of Native prisoners at the Hiland Mountain Correctional Center in Eagle River would like to have him come and speak to them during their weekly meeting. Little Chief did, and the inmates wound up choosing him to be their spiritual leader. As pipe carrier of Cheyenne and Sioux heritage, Little Chief did not feel he could turn away from the request.

In his belief, the pipe carriers do not own the pipes they carry. The pipes are owned by the people, and are carried by those such as Little Chief for the benefit of the people. While those prisoners belonging to the Native Cultural Council may for the most part have been Athabascan, Inuit, Tlingit and other Alaska peoples rather than Cheyenne or Sioux, Little Chief still felt the obligation to answer their call.

He knew first hand what they were experiencing. Little Chief has himself been locked behind prison walls five different times, for a total of 12 years. "What was landing me in prison was alcohol," Little Chief recalls, naming the influence behind the crimes of most of the Alaska Native inmates. He got into alcohol because of the turmoil he went through as an American Indian in a society cold to his heritage. He suffered verbal and physical abuses, and sought escape in the bottle.

This only made matters worse. "I got flat tired of being in prison," Little Chief recalls the despair which motivated him to seek a solution beyond alcohol. "I was not getting anything done, I had years lost that I couldn't regain. I began to think of the old people, what my people had taught me."

When he was young, Little Chief had been fortunate to hear a great deal of what the elders of his tribes had to say. Five different band chiefs lived within a short distance of his home. He took in their words as he did those of his elderly relatives. He did not understand all of what they meant in his earlier days, but the meanings seemed to become more clear to him as time went on.

In prison, Little Chief heard a speech by Archie Fire Lane Deer, a traditional spiritual leader. Fire Lane Deer spoke of going back to the values of the people, "to stand up for



Paul Little Chief, spiritual leader for the Native Cultural Council visits with a "brother" at the prison.

PHOTOS BY BILL HESS

my peoples' ways!

"He said, 'there are over 100 of you sitting here. Fifteen of you will listen. Of the fifteen, five of you will try, and of the five, only three of you will succeed.' When he said, 'stand up and be counted,' I wanted to be one of the three!" Little Chief recalls.

From the elders Little Chief has learned of the value of a vision quest. After regaining his freedom, he went to a mountain top, as his people had been doing since long before Columbus, to seek wisdom in the traditional way. With only a blanket, he would fast and pray for four days and four nights.

Little Chief remembers a bear coming up to him on the mountain. "He was saying, 'get off my mountain!' My physical being wanted to get up and run. But I remembered that I would be tested." Little Chief wondered if what he saw was a real bear or a spirit bear, preying on the 'bad part' of him, the darkness in his soul, to drive him from his quest. He decided to hold his ground. It was a spirit bear, Little Chief says, and when it knew he was willing to sacrifice his life, it finally let him be.

Little Chief says he did get his visions; not all of what he learned was left in his con-

scious mind, but comes back at different times as the situations arise when he needs to know.

When Little Chief talks to the inmates who gather each Wednesday evening at the Native Cultural Council, he talks of the spiritual values of the sweatlodge, noting differences in the way different tribes set it up and carry out the ceremonies, but stresses that the basic purposes are the same.

He speaks of other concepts from his traditional teachings, much of which sounds similar to the ideas being heard around Alaska as Native people look back to the elders and their cultural values to find the strength to deal with the modern world; sharing, respect for elders, listening to the elders, modesty, harmony with nature, cooperation, and so on.

Thousands of miles separate the western plains of Little Chief's native Montana from Alaska. There are many cultural differences. How can he be of help to Natives here who seek to learn more of their traditions? "Our way of life, the basic elements of our people are the same," Little Chief answers. "The way may be different, but the values told in

the stories are the same.

"On the plains, the buffalo was the mainstay of the people. In the coastal regions, it was the whale, the killer whale, the seal . . . The stories of the buffalo and the whale, the teachings, are the same. They say we're different. We can't be different if the meaning of the stories is the same."

Little Chief also sees strong parallels between the "white man's black book," the Koran, the "Red Road" which he follows, and other spiritual beliefs of the world. All lead in the same direction, he says. The trouble Little Chief sees is that many do not live up to the teachings of their black book. They have lost eight of its teachings when they try to coerce his people into foreign lifestyles and discount their traditional ways as paganistic and savage.

Such people have a hard time understanding Native values, incorporating their spiritual beliefs into all of life, when their own beliefs might be practised one day a week for just a few hours, says Little Chief.

Prison was a hard time for Little Chief. He knows it is hard for those he now works with at Eagle River. "I've been telling them, 'make use of your time. Make it work for you. Instead of venting your anger against the judicial system, use your energy to deal with what put you here — you!'"

The work Little Chief does at Eagle River is all voluntary; he gets no pay. On top of that, he has been carrying 19 credit hours at Anchorage Community College, and has been very active in many Native events around Anchorage. He is the chairman of the board of the Alaska Native American Indian Student Organization at the school, and a senator for the ACC student association, is on the curriculum Review and Admissions and Standard Committees for ACC, and is a peer counselor for the college's Student Orientation Services.

Fortunately, Little Chief's wife, Damaris, originally of Kodiak, supports him in his efforts.

"That Eagle River just picks me up," Little Chief speaks of his work at the prison. "It's so exciting to watch them grow. You see them change from boys to men."

Many of those whom Little Chief has been working with in the Native Cultural Council possess obvious qualities of leadership. Yet, they will face some rough battles when they again hit the streets as free men. The past shows that many will wind up back in prison. If he as a Cheyenne pipe carrier can help a Tlingit, Athabascan, Yupic, Inupiat or other Alaska Native to reach back for the roots that have long made their people strong in Alaska, then Little Chief can only feel good about the time given at Eagle River.



Each council meeting is opened and closed with a prayer, led here by Little Chief.